

“Taming Jesus”

a sermon by

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Text: “Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ (Luke 9:62).

Bernhard Lewis, who for a number of years taught Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, has written recently about an aspect of the War on Terror that should concern all of us. Osama Bin Laden has made it very clear that from his point of view there has been a struggle between Christianity and Islam that has been going on since the advent of Islam in the Seventh Century. For Bin Laden one of the major stages of this conflict ended with what appeared to be a final victory over the West with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire--the last of the great Muslim states and the partition of most of the Muslim world between the Western powers.

As Osama Bin Laden puts it: “In this final phase of the ongoing struggle, the world of the infidels was divided between the two superpowers--the United States and the Soviet Union. Now we have defeated the more dangerous of the two. Dealing with the pampered and effeminate Americans will be easy.” Bin Laden then recites the usual litany of American defeats: Vietnam, Beirut, Somalia. “They can’t take it.” he asserted, “All you have to do is hit them and they will run.”

Lewis points out that the American response after September 11th was vigorous both in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. But Lewis goes on to say that the debate about the war in Iraq today in America, even though we view it as necessary in a free society, is viewed by Al Qaeda as a sign of weakness. Lewis sees encouraging signs of the developing of free institutions in the world of Islam. The question that he raises is whether Americans have the will to win the War on Terror.

He concludes with a sobering thought: “Either we will bring them freedom, or they will destroy us.”

I.

One of the most egregious things that we have done in the church is to “tame” Jesus. We have turned him into a kind of soft idealist, whose life and words do not have much real meaning for us. We hail him as a great teacher, a great example, and a noble human being. We forget, however, just how intrusive he was.

Take, for example, the three sayings of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel that form our Scripture today. Luke has placed these sayings of Jesus in that period of Jesus’ ministry when Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem where he knows he faces opposition and crucifixion. They place before us in vivid terms the cost of discipleship.

The first saying is directed to a person who makes a spontaneous, enthusiastic offer to follow Jesus. The answer that Jesus gives this person drives home the gravity of discipleship. The Son of Man is on his way to Jerusalem. As such he is “on the road.” He lives the life of a homeless wanderer--no shelter, no family, no home--none of what most of us would call the “basics.” Jesus said that even the foxes of the field or the birds of the air are better off than he.

The second call is initiated by Jesus himself, but he lays out the conditions of acceptance. In this case a man begs for a little time to fulfill a family obligation. His father has died, and this man wants to go and bury his father before he becomes a follower of Jesus. “Let the dead bury the dead,” said Jesus.

Now, let’s be honest about this. This saying offends most, if not all, of us. It is hardly consistent with what today is called euphemistically “family values.” Surely, Jesus cannot be serious. Doesn’t he understand the most basic family responsibility? For Jesus there is something even more important than a family responsibility: he is announcing the kingship of God.

The third saying resembles the first in that it comes from a man who wants to be a follower of Jesus. He has only one simple request. He wants to return to his home and say goodbye to his friends and family. This saying is clearly related to the story of the call of Elisha (I Kings 19:19-21) who asked Elijah if he could first go home and bid his mother and father good-bye.

But, for Jesus there are no exceptions. Just as a person plowing a field cannot afford to look back over his shoulder or else he will lose his place in the field, so Jesus says that anyone who looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God.

So, please don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that Jesus did not comfort people. He did. “Come unto me all you who labor and rest.” These are his words. He healed the sick. He gave sight to the blind. He cast out the demons of mental illness.

But, when you consider the nature of the comfort that he gave to his disciples, there is no mistaking its quality. “The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and the house did not fall because it was built on a rock.” That is comfort. Security, peace, stability,

adequacy for life--that is what Jesus brought. Let us not try to “tame” Jesus, but let us think for a moment about the qualities of strength in Jesus that seek out the qualities of strength in us.

II.

The first is that Jesus had an unrelenting conscience. We speak of Jesus as a “man of peace,” and certainly he was. But Jesus was also a person of conscience. In fact, he said on one occasion, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Jesus faced danger at almost every turn of his life. As a child, his mother and father had to take him from Bethlehem to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod. One of the very first sermons he preached was in his hometown of Nazareth. At first, the people of his hometown received him gladly. After all, they had heard about his extraordinary powers to heal, and the crowds that thronged around him. But when Jesus began to speak about racial prejudice, the people of his own community turned against him and tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4).

Why did the people of his own hometown try to kill Jesus? He had an unrelenting conscience. Why did the religious leaders of his day turn against Jesus? He cleansed the temple of the moneychangers and merchants of greed who had turned the house of God into a den of robbers.

One of the most powerful figures of our time is the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned by the government of South Africa for nineteen years because of his opposition to Apartheid in that nation.

After his release Mandela showed no bitterness or hatred toward his captors. When asked if he would do it again, Mandela said that he would gladly give his life to stop the horrible practice of Apartheid.

That is an unrelenting conscience and there is no more powerful force in the entire world than a person who is willing to take a stand on principle regardless of the consequences.

III.

There was something else about Jesus that was disturbing as well. He not only had an unrelenting conscience, he had a keen understanding of radical obedience to the will of God. When the crowd wanted to crown him as king or when his own disciples sought for political and economic gain, Jesus was quick to respond, “The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served.” At Gethsemane, shortly before his crucifixion, he prayed “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

Jesus had a keen sense that his ultimate purpose in life was to point people to God. “He who has seen me,” he said, “has seen the father.”

One of the questions that most need to struggle with is the question: “Has our religion become too soft?” For many of us our faith has a kind of “respectable” quality. We come to worship, if we are in town for the weekend and if there are no competing activities. We give to

the church, but many of us give out of what is left over when we have bought everything we want. Most of us, I suspect, are not really so much worried about sin. It is not very likely that our lives are going to go to pieces. But softness? Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke to a group of Seminary students on what he called “The Dangers and Hazards of the Christian Ministry.” In that sermon he reminded his hearers that one of the greatest temptations that ministers face is that we will lose the courage to try to see the truth and to speak the truth.

Karl Marx once spoke of religion as “the opiate of the people” and certainly it can degenerate into a pool of sentimentality and emotionalism that is little more than a bromide that someone might take for an upset stomach

But, there is another side of religion that is not soft. Was the Apostle Paul soft when he faced shipwreck, angry mobs, prison, stoning, and fierce animals? Was Martin Luther soft when he stood before a German Emperor and declared that his conscience was captive to the Word of God? Was Hugh Latimer soft, when before he was burned at the stake in Oxford, England, he turned to his companion and said, “We will light a fire that will never be extinguished in England?”

IV.

This morning is Dedication Sunday at First Presbyterian Church. In a few minutes you will be asked to bring your pledge card to the Communion table as an act of worship and witness to support the ministry of this church.

But Dedication Sunday is not about money. It is about something much larger than whether we can make a budget or not. At its heart it is a challenge to each one of us to commit our life to Christ in some way that heretofore we have not done.

As a church, we live in tension between two voices. There is one voice that says, “We can’t.” You can’t make a difference in terms of what happens in Charlotte. The public schools are beyond saving. Poverty is so overwhelming that there is nothing any of us can do.

But there is another voice that says, “We can.” We can make a difference. We can proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can commit ourselves, our resources, and our witness to every one of God’s children.

At the end of his life, when he was in prison facing death, the Apostle Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy these words: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

There is no finer thing we can say about a person than that.

May God give us wisdom and courage for the facing of these days!
Amen!